HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20515

October 23, 2003

The Honorable Tom Ridge
Secretary
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We are writing to express our concerns over the threat to our Nation's security from terrorists deploying "dirty bombs" here in the United States. We are asking that you or designated member of your staff brief our respective committees about this threat and our government's ability to counter it.

The threat from such simple but devastating weapons is not new. Since the mid -1990's there has been concern that certain radioactive material, such as cobalt-60, strontium-90, cesium-137, iridium-192, and americium-241, could be used in the construction of a radiological dispersion device—commonly referred to as a "dirty bomb." Such radioactive materials are used in devices that treat cancer, sterilize food and medical instruments, and detect flaws in pipelines and other types of metal welds. Much of the radioactive material used in these devices is encapsulated, or sealed, in metal such as stainless steel, titanium, or platinum to prevent its dispersal. A dirty bomb could be produced by using explosives in combination with radioactive material upon detonation. Most experts agree that the dispersed radioactive material would have few short-term health effects on exposed individuals and that the explosives, not the radioactive material, would likely cause the greatest amount of immediate injuries, fatalities, and property damage.

However, a dirty bomb—depending on the type, form, amount, and concentration of radioactive material used—could cause radiation exposure in individuals in close proximity to the material for an extended time and potentially increase the long-term risks of cancer for those contaminated. In addition, the evacuation and cleanup of contaminated areas after such an explosion could lead to panic and serious economic costs

Recent revelations in the press highlight the reality of these warnings. In last week's Washington Times, Bill Gertz alleged that key al Qaeda operatives were spotted in Hamilton, Ontario attempting to obtain radioactive material from McMaster University as part of a plot to strike targets here in the United States.

In that article, Mr. Gertz quotes an unnamed Homeland Security Department official as stating that "**recent information** indicates al Qaeda is **continuing to plan attacks**, including strikes within the United States." He further quotes William H. Parrish, who he identifies as an intelligence official in your Department, as stating that "we have received a lot of good information ... over the past several weeks and corroborated the fact there were active plans, ongoing, to conduct another attack in the United States".

Mr. Gertz' information dovetails with what our investigative staffs have uncovered. Their preliminary findings are that the threat from "dirty bombs" is very real and our ability to respond to this threat is inadequate. Our staffs have learned that:

- Potentially dangerous sealed radioactive sources containing "greater than Class-C radioactive material" pose a threat to national security because terrorist could use them to make a "dirty bomb."

- According to several studies, there could be anywhere from 250,000 to 500,000 of "greater than Class-C sources" in the United States but the actual number is unknown because no one has kept track of this information.

- Furthermore, GAO has recently found that about 150 holders of these radioactive sources, containing plutonium-239, must continue to store and secure these sources on their premises because DOE doesn't have enough secure storage at its facilities to collect and store them. Plutonium –239 can be used to make a crude nuclear bomb as well as a "dirty bomb."

- One hundred and fourteen of these holders are universities, which, in the past, have used this material for research. GAO recently contacted six of these universities whose representatives said that they no longer want the material. Two universities told GAO that they experienced security problems with the nuclear material specifically where doors to the rooms with the nuclear material had been found unlocked or open.

- Since 1998, more than 1,300 incidents have taken place in the United States where radioactive sealed sources have been lost, stolen, or abandoned. While the majority of the devices were subsequently recovered, the security of sealed radioactive sources varies widely.

- Also, a potential security weakness exists in NRC's licensing process to obtain sealed sources. Approved applicants may buy sealed sources as soon as a new license is issued by mail. Because the process assumes the applicant is acting in good faith, it could take up to a year before NRC conducts an inspection of the

- applicant. It is possible that sealed sources could be obtained for malicious intent.

- In addition, GAO recently found that because NRC has had problems in locating the owners of sealed radioactive sources, it has contracted with a private investigation firm to help locate owners.

- The number of sealed radioactive sources in use worldwide is unknown although it is estimated that nearly 10 million sealed sources exist in the United States and the 53 countries responding to a recent GAO survey.

- That GAO survey also found that controls over this nuclear material vary greatly between countries and focus primarily on protecting public health and safety rather than on securing sealed sources from theft or destructive use.

- Since fiscal year 2002, DOE has received about $37 million to assist other countries to control their sealed sources. However, GAO found that DOE's initial efforts lacked adequate planning and coordination and that the majority of the program funds were spent in the United States rather than in the countries of the former Soviet Union—where DOE believes the greatest threat exists.

In addition, our staffs have advised us of other serious problems at our borders that raise further concerns about our Government's response to this serious threat. Work that GAO has done for us indicates that more effort is required to successfully

In sum, our staffs' work along with the recent press revelations raises the following questions regarding the Department of Homeland Security (DHS):

- What is DHS' role in ensuring the control of radiological sources (material that could be used to make a dirty bomb) in the United States and abroad?

- Is DHS coordinating with other federal agencies with responsibilities relating to the control of radiological sources?

- Is DHS cooperating with state and local governments to ensure the control of radiological sources and to plan for effective response in the event of a terrorist attack using this material?

- What is the role of DHS in ensuring the quick deployment of radiation detection equipment at U.S. ports of entry?

- What is the role of DHS in coordinating the numerous research programs and pilot projects related to the development of better detection technologies government –wide?

In conclusion, we urge your earliest response to our request for a detailed accounting of your agency's efforts to combat this serious threat. We look forward to working with you in addressing any shortfalls in authority, staffing or budget that may hinder your efforts in this area.

Sincerely,

Jim Turner
Ranking Member
Select Committee on Homeland Security

Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Member
Committee on Government Reform